

by
ŞERİFE HANIM

**A Turkish *yemek destanı*
(food poem)**

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AT first we make soup, of an excellent kind,
From a well-flavored stock, garnished with garlic;
With onions, tomatoes, lemon, and okra—
A nice appetizer, served hot, not too thick.¹

Touch wood, as they say, I throw nothing away,
Nor do I begin without buying fresh bread.
You should not fry eggs when the fat is too hot.²
The meat that you buy should be fresh and light red.

*Baklava*³ and *börek*⁴ place on the table,
And sweet-tasting *helva*,⁵ as high as a tower.
Let the friends you invite always be constant—
A host should be cheerful, whatever the hour.

Always be careful in making *baklava*,
Take great care in rolling and cut into rounds;
Then fill the center with ground nuts and almonds—
Be sure, it will taste just as nice as it sounds.

Puff pastry for *börek*, rolled into thin squares,
Before the meat browns, add chopped onions and spice.
Fold each square firmly, and crimp at the edges—
With parsley and pepper they taste very nice.

Artichoke, celery, spinach, and marrow,
And cauliflower tossed in parslane, if you wish;
Potatoes, tomatoes, black-eyed beans, and mint—
These add to the flavor of most any dish.

Next make macaroni, *keşkeş*, and *kuskus*,⁶
Spaghetti and noodles, boil well and then drain;
Then poached egg with yogurt,⁷ and omelette with herbs—
Throw nothing away, you can use it again.

Stuffed cabbage and vine leaves,⁸ *köfte*⁹ on skewers—
 Make sure that the meat is quite fresh, not too old;
 Then *yahni*¹⁰ with chickpeas, or wild apricots,
 And salads of beetroot and turnip, served cold.¹¹

Fry fish, dredged in flour, until it is done,
 Don't let pickled cabbage dry out on the plate.
 A squeeze of fresh lemon goes well with the oil—
 Let's eat and be merry before it's too late.

Always be thankful for what you are given.
 Good food, as they say, makes you healthy and strong;
 But don't overdo it, don't eat till you burst—
 In life such indulgence is always quite wrong.

Everything served here is cheap, but it's wholesome—
 Pray, do not complain, friends, there can be no grounds.
 Our bill, when it's tendered, won't be excessive:
 A shilling or two, say, and ten thousand pounds.

Soup should be served the first course on the menu,
 Served hot or served cold, either creamy or clear;
 Then, as they say, one thing follows another—
 Tobacco and coffee will bring up the rear.

For puddings and snacks, make *güllaç* and *sütlaç*,¹²
 Cook till they thicken, don't make them too runny.
 For every salt course that you serve, serve two sweet—
 Serve *güllaç* with sugar, sweeter than honey.

Friends, broad beans and cowpeas I cannot resist,
 And eggplant, grown wild, in meadow or garden.
 After the meal, serve sweet melon and peaches—
 When they're in season, most fruits are a bargain.

If you make *kadayıf*,¹³ shred well the pastry,
 Make sure that it's fluffy, do not break the strands.
 Bake in an oven, then sprinkle with syrup.
Kadayıf is known now in most other lands.

Now we have eaten, our feast is completed.
 Thank God that we live in a prosperous time!
 May God send you joy and every good fortune.
 In 1314¹⁴ I composed this short rhyme.

COMMENT

Whereas in the Ottoman Empire the ruling classes adopted the orthodox culture of Islam, many among the common people found an outlet for their religious aspirations in a variety of heterodox mystic orders (*tekke* or *tarika*), such as the Bektashiya. In the lodges of such orders initiates would meet to engage in spiritual exercises, chant litanies and invocations, and celebrate festivals. At such festivals storytellers would tell humorous stories and sing songs, commenting on life and poking fun at the moral and intellectual inconsistencies of the orthodox faith. In the poem here translated, a *yemek destanı* composed by Şerife Hanım in 1896, the art of Turkish cookery is celebrated. In the poem Şerife Hanım, who lived in Konya, refers to herself as an aşık (one who is faithful to the order, but not an initiate). The original version of the poem may be consulted in Vasfi Mahir Kocatürk, *Saz şiiri antolojisi* [Anthology of lute poems], Ankara Matbaası, Ankara, pp. 472-74.

NOTES

1. In Turkey soup is generally served as the first course on the menu. It is believed to be good for the digestion. The soup here referred to is *terbiyeli çorba*. The stock used to make *terbiyeli çorba* is made from sheep's trotters, and thickened with eggs and flour.

2. Eggs in Turkey are fried individually in butter, in a skillet.

3. *Baklava* is made of twenty-eight or more sheets of phyllo pastry, layered and buttered, with a nut mixture at the center. Before baking it is cut into diagonal strips. When it is done, syrup is poured over it.

4. As many as fifteen different types of *börek* are to be found in Turkey. The great majority consist of up to twenty-eight layers of pastry, rolled thin and stacked, and filled with a cheese or meat filling. It is believed that the Turks brought *börek* with them when they settled in Asia Minor.

5. *Helva* is made of flour, water, honey, and butter. Semolina or cream of wheat may also be used in place of flour. In the past, during the coldest days of winter, people frequently gathered together to eat *helva* at parties especially arranged for the purpose. It was also a favorite dish at weddings.

6. *Kuskus* is made of flour, eggs, boiled and pounded wheat, milk, and water. The ingredients are mixed until they form small pellets, the size of lentils, which are then steamed and laid out in the shade to dry. *Keşkeş* is made of ground wheat, boiled in a cauldron. When the wheat is well boiled, small pieces of meat, previously cooked, are added. The mixture is cooked continuously until it acquires the consistency of a thick paste. It is served on a plate with melted butter.

7. This dish, called *çalbır* in Turkish, consists of poached eggs with salted yogurt. It is sometimes eaten with melted butter, spiced with paprika or cayenne.

8. Stuffed vegetables, in particular cabbage, pepper, artichoke, and eggplant, are very popular in Turkey. A mixture of rice, onions, currants, and pine nuts is frequently used for the stuffing.

9. *Köfte* is a kind of hamburger made of finely ground meat, egg, and onion,

spiced with salt and pepper.

10. This dish consists of mutton or beef cubes, lightly fried, mixed with garlic, onions, or chickpeas; and even on occasion apricot or quince, finely sliced.

11. In Turkey beetroot is generally cooked, peeled, and grated, and served with yogurt. Turnip is grated raw, and served with an olive oil and lemon dressing.

12. Milk dishes are sold in a *muhallebici*, not to be confused with a *pastahane*, where sweet pastries are sold. *Sütlaç* is a sort of rice pudding. *Güllaç* is a sweet made from starch wafers, filled with nuts and milky syrup, flavored with rose water.

13. *Kadayıf* is made of stringlike strands of pastry, mixed with nuts.

14. A.D. 1896.